

THE ATTITUDES TOWARDS EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP STATES: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ELITES' COMMITMENT FOR FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract: *The paper examines how the cooperation with the EU has been influencing public sector, legal and economic reforms in EU's Eastern neighbourhood by means of engaging the local political elites. The developments in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as well as the situation in Armenia, regarding the perspective for its further participation in the Eastern Partnership (EaP), are reviewed. In order to determine under which conditions the EU can have more influence over the political elites, the paper examines how the degree of commitment to the European norms and, consequently, the pace of reforms, depend on internal political situation and foreign policy priorities, on historical and cultural legacies, or the level of dependence on Russia.*

Keywords: *Eastern Partnership; Eastern Neighbourhood Policy; integration theories; normative power*

Introduction

The debates about EU impact on domestic political changes in non-EU member states follow two main theoretical approaches. The instrumentalist approach implies that domestic political elites would tend to maximise their benefits from EU-driven internal changes (Börzel *et al.*, 2003, 2012; Schimmelfennig *et al.*, 2005; Vachudova, 2005). Concurrently, internal institutional decision-making templates constitute another important factor determining the elites' strategic behaviour. In turn, the constructivist approach focuses on sociological factors influencing the level of flexibility of the elites as they move towards transformation according to EU's norms and practices (Delanty *et al.*, 2005; Vachudova, 2005).

An important variable determining the degree of commitment to the European norms is formed by historical and cultural legacies from the previous regimes. In the case of the EaP states, this factor provides a significant explanation

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for preference or indifference concerning the European norms, which may be at odds with the Soviet/Russian legacy: “if path-dependency prevails and national strategies are built on persisting Soviet-era mentalities, a strong external leverage may be necessary to create the momentum for change. Thus, the EU’s external influence might face considerable resistance when there is path-dependency” (Franke *et al.*, 2010, p. 155). Accordingly, Soviet legacy of an incumbent regime may increase adaptation costs related to EU demands, resulting in resistance to EU norms and appropriate reforms. On the other hand, political leaders and other actors identifying themselves as “belonging to Europe” because of historical and cultural legacy may have the EU as a “reference point” for national level political activity.

There is also an assumption that liberal governments devoted to democratic decision-making principles are more committed to implementation of EU level policies:

The costs of adaptation to EU demands for domestic change are lower for incumbent governments of democratic states with market economies than for authoritarian regimes, which have a firm grip on economy and society as a result of which compliance with EU requirements threatens their hold on power. [...] Thus, we expect that the more authoritarian a regime is, the less likely the EU is to influence domestic institutional change. This scope condition applies particularly to EU demands for domestic reforms with regard to human rights, the rule of law, democracy, or market economy (Börzel *et al.*, 2012, p. 12).

A group of experts from the EaP states, directly involved in monitoring of public policies and reform performance, notes:

The instruments of cooperation and integration the EU offers are technical in nature and cannot compete with stronger geopolitical factors. The EaP also lacks policy tools that can be deployed when domestic power considerations and vested interests prevail to work against European integration. The case of Ukraine under Yanukovych and Armenia’s U-turn are the two most obvious examples (Lovitt, 2015, p. 8).

Besides, they also underscore the importance of the rule of law and political pluralism:

In all six [EaP participant] countries, the veto-players are stronger and are to be found among the political elites. The reform-minded actors are mostly in civil society and small and medium-sized businesses,



although Moldova, Georgia and now Ukraine have seen some of these players join the government in senior roles after elections have brought about a change of government.

The veto-players enjoy the broadest space for manoeuvre in situations when the rule of law is weak or absent, and when pluralism and political competition are suppressed (Lovitt, 2015, p. 9).

The majority of theoretical work on EU impact on domestic political changes in non-member states is based on an analysis of transition processes in Central and Eastern Europe, especially on post-communist states that since 2004 joined the EU. That allows doing a number of comparisons and may provide a basis for “transition know-how”. That perhaps also explains the particular mutual interest between the Visegrad Four and the Baltic States on the one side, and EaP states, on the other side.

Considering the EU leverage on domestic political change, and taking into account the transition experience of Central and Eastern European states, Vachudova (2005, pp. 257-258) suggested that getting closer to the EU makes convergence between aspirant states more likely, and three mechanisms encourage it – conditionality, credible commitment and influence on domestic groups. However, before convergence occurs, the habit to elect illiberal, rent-seeking rulers has to be broken.

Most of the literature on Europeanisation lacks a theoretical approach towards non-EU member states examining both the character and the degree of EU involvement in domestic transformations vis-à-vis internal factors explaining readiness to accept EU requirements or resistance to them. A large part of literature on non-EU members focuses on direct EU influence. The indirect EU influence on domestic transformations, such as the change of internal opportunity structure and shaping of domestic actors’ preferences, remain largely unexplored. As noted by scholars working particularly towards filling that research gap,

we encounter the limitations of the existing approaches to Europeanisation beyond enlargement, which focus heavily on EU-level factors. As a result, the literature on non-accession Europeanisation has reduced the role of domestic factors to mere intervening variables, which tend to be very broad (e.g. (non) democratic regimes and dependency). This is because scholars have primarily (even though not exclusively) focused on the conditions under which the EU successfully exports its regulatory and institutional templates, leaving aside the conditions under which third countries decide to adopt them (Delcour *et al.*, 2015, p. 492).

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have been in the focus of more studies, with a substantial work done. In Armenia’s case, paradoxically, most of the research in



that direction has been done in the three, after relinquishing the association agreement with the EU, subsequently followed by the decision to join the EEU.

Timuş (2009, pp. 172-173), whose work focuses on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, noted that the presence of both instrumentalist and constructivist logic may be observed in the empirical analysis of EU influence on Eastern neighbours. Timuş notes that from a constructivist point of view, the EU is most successful in supporting liberal democratic forces, which can use the rhetorical promises of European officials in order to obtain internal political legitimacy and international credibility. She also notes that research confirms the instrumentalist approach regarding the weakness of EU bargaining power in promoting domestic political changes outside its borders, as the lack of strong incentives, primarily membership perspective, as well as the vaguely defined EU requirements in general, represent the major variables that determine the nature (direct versus indirect) and the extent of EU involvement. At the same time, the absence of EU membership perspective does not imply the failure of EU leverage on the non-members: the EU still can influence domestic political transformations by providing intermediary rewards, such as visa facilitation, preferential trade agreements, etc. Indeed, visa facilitation and, at a later stage, liberalisation has been one of the attractive rewards for the EaP states.¹

However, Scrinic notes that EaP states' national elites often take the European norms formally and imitate reforms, and, at the same time, share tendencies to autocracy and to bringing oligarchs to governance, so that may eventually lead to criminal control of their countries. Scrinic considers the European institutions partially responsible because, due to the geopolitical stakes, the pseudo-European elites are forgiven in exchange for displaying a pro-European attitude. In Scrinic's view, this situation corrupts the image of the EU and of its normative values (Scrinic, 2014, p. 228).

1. Georgia: political context

In Georgia's case, the argument about the veto players being stronger than reformists could be questioned as there has been general consensus on the need for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, as both the ruling Georgian Dream coalition and the strong opposition represented by the United National Movement (UNM) share that commitment. Moreover, as relations between them have been quite tense, it would be a little (if any) exaggeration to say that the Resolution on Basic Directions of Georgia's Foreign Policy adopted in March 2013 by a unanimous vote was the only issue on which the Georgian Dream and the UNM agreed unequivocally. That resolution said, in particular:

¹ Visa-free travel to the Schengen zone states for citizens of Moldova has been possible since April 2014. Lifting the visa requirement for citizens of Georgia and Ukraine is awaiting approval by the EU Council and the European Parliament.

Integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures represents the main priority of the country's foreign policy course. ... Georgian authorities will provide implementation of all those conditions, which will allow Georgia to successfully complete negotiations with the European Union on Association Agreement; Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement and Visa Liberalisation Agreement; ... Georgia should not either have diplomatic relations or be in a military, political, customs alliance with a state, which recognizes independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/former autonomous district of South Ossetia or has Georgia's territories occupied (Civil Georgia, 2013).

The authors of the European Integration Index perhaps suggested strengthening of veto players because of the dismissal of the Defence Minister, Irakli Alasania, in November 2014, when he accused prosecutors of using investigations into the defence ministry to disrupt Georgia's plans for NATO integration. Consequently, Alasania's Free Democrats Party – liberal and pro-Western – left the Georgian Dream coalition that consisted of “members whose ideologies range from pro-Western liberalism to outright nationalism” (Kobzova, 2013, p. 2). It could be suggested that the main issue cementing the coalition together from the beginning had been the desire to bring down Mikheil Saakashvili's administration. However, the coalition has remained committed to the European integration, even though some members have been expressing certain scepticism about it and have suggested seeking an improvement of relations with Russia instead.

Although no change in Georgia's strategic direction has happened ostensibly, the UNM vocally accuses the government of moving towards a pro-Russian position. The relations between the Georgian Dream and the UNM have been tense all the time since the elections won by the former in October 2012. Already in November 2012, near 30 former officials – UNM appointees, including the former interior and defence ministers and the army chief of staff, were arrested on charges of abuse of power. In May 2013, the former prime minister, UNM secretary general Vano Merabishvili was also arrested, and is now serving a prison term. His imprisonment caused some concerns about the possibility of selective justice. During a visit to Georgia, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton stated: “There should be no selective justice; no retribution against political rivals. Investigations into past wrongdoings must be, and must be seen to be, impartial, transparent and in compliance with due process” (European Commission, 2012).

While the European Integration Index considered “striking a balance between prosecutions of abuse of power and “selective justice” among the top challenges for Georgia (Lovitt, 2015, p. 38), as well as mentioned the delay of civil service reform as a particular issue of concern (Lovitt, 2015, p. 40), it also



acknowledged serious improvements in the area of free and fair elections, as well as in public accountability, independence of the judiciary, and in human rights and media freedom.

Despite some remaining concerns, Georgia has been the leader among EaP countries as it managed to have judicial self-governing bodies and to implement the most rules and procedures aimed at creating an independent judiciary already by 2011 (Solonenko, 2012, p. 53). In general, Georgia has been the best performer among EaP countries regarding approximation, i.e. legislation, practices and institutions in the EaP countries converging towards EU standards and in line with EU requirements (Lovitt, 2015, p. 40). Particularly, in 2014 the parliament adopted a Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination despite criticism by the Patriarchy of Georgia – an influential veto player.² As far as the political, economic and social ties between EaP countries and the EU are concerned, Georgia has been the best performer among the EaP countries, having the least number of mutual trade barriers with the EU already before concluding the negotiations on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (Solonenko, 2012, p. 29).

Some of the recent assessments also show considerable progress. Georgia has improved its score in the Freedom of the Press (Freedom House, 2016a) and Nations in Transit (Freedom House, 2016b) rankings, being the leader in the post-Soviet area; got a higher ranking in the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders, 2016) than some EU members and candidate countries; stayed above several EU members and candidates in the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2015); got a higher ranking in the Index of Economic Freedom (Heritage Foundation, 2016) than most of EU members; and so forth.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that Georgia has some unique experience in the post-Soviet area – the peaceful and secure transfer of power from the government to the opposition after the 2012 elections. As noted before, that, together with the clear ambition for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, provides a solid platform for the further development of electoral democracy (Grigoryan, 2014a, p. 68). A recent poll also reaffirms the strong popular support for European and Euro-Atlantic integration: NATO support is at 68 percent and EU support – at 77 percent (National Democratic Institute, 2016). The coming parliamentary elections in October 2016 may be expected to become another important turning point, highly important for the continuing systematic advancement of democratic reforms.

2. Moldova: political context

² The particular significance of the anti-discrimination law is due to the misinterpretation of its meaning by the opponents of European integration. A similar pattern may be observed in the other EaP states as well: gender equality and non-discrimination of the sexual minorities are used by hostile propaganda as “proofs” of the West’s immorality imposed on partner states with an intention to destroy the traditional moral, culture, way of life, etc.

For years, Moldova was considered reform leader among the EaP countries. Several editions of the European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries, and also other assessments, such as the Freedom in the World reports by the Freedom House and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index also used to give Moldova the highest score in the region. Moldova's performance was evaluated as the best especially as democratisation indicators were considered, with significant progress in the areas of civil liberties, human rights and electoral reform (Solonenko, 2012, p. 6). Later on, Moldova continued to have the highest level of democratic control over security and law enforcement institutions among the EaP countries, but it was also noted that there were difficulties in advancing the practice of democratic control (Lovitt, 2015, p. 38). The need to reform the Prosecutor's office was mentioned among the main challenges (Lovitt, 2015, p. 32). The reforms in general were slowed down by a lack of reform of law enforcement agencies, as it often happens in the post-communist countries (Litra, 2013a).

The slowing down of some essential reforms could perhaps be explained by the weakness of pro-EU government coalitions and the number of veto players. However, the history of coalition arrangements as such, with tense relations between coalition partners, also held back the reform progress. It has been noted that "Moldova's elite has consistently lacked the will to reform a political system that primarily serves its own interests, yet the EU has turned a blind eye to the abuses of successive governments for years" (Kostanyan, 2016, p. 1) and "cosmetic reforms have been carried out to create the illusion that the country is making progress, primarily to secure aid from donors" (Kostanyan, 2016, p. 2).

All coalitions formed in Moldova since 2009 have had a narrow majority; in some periods, minority governments were formed. The parliament elected in April 2009, with the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) having 60 of 101 seats, failed to elect a president twice and was dissolved (the Constitution requires a qualified majority of 61 votes to elect a president). After the early elections in July 2009, the first Alliance for European Integration (AIE) was formed by four parties having 53 of 101 seats. Again, it was not possible to elect a president and the parliament was dissolved in September 2010. After the early elections in November 2010, three members of the previous AIE – the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM), the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) and the Liberal Party (PL) formed a coalition with 59 seats, and it took three attempts to elect Nicolae Timofti for president in March 2012; Timofti's election eventually became possible as three MPs defected from the PCRM.

However, the AIE experienced internal problems that eventually led to its dissolution in February 2013, following a crisis resulted from mutual mistrust and conflicting interests among the coalition members. Then Prime Minister Vlad Filat (PLDM) had been claiming since 2011 that the Prosecutor's office and other institutions controlled by the PDM were making politicised decisions in corruption cases. In turn, Filat's opponents (and coalition partners at the same time) accused him of corruption. In February 2013, Filat again publicly accused the parliament's



first speaker Vlad Plahotniuc (PDM representative) of corruption and other crimes, and announced about termination of the coalition agreement. Filat also appealed to coalition members to reorganise the alliance without Plahotniuc's participation. Two days later, the National Anti-Corruption Centre (controlled by the PDM) searched the government offices, including the office of the prime minister. In response, the PLDM made an opportunistic alliance with and the PCRM, voting for termination of the post of first deputy speaker in order to remove Plahotniuc from his position. Three weeks later, already the PDM joined with the PCRM in order to pass a no-confidence vote on Filat's cabinet. Afterwards, PDM leader, parliament speaker Marian Lupu proposed former coalition partners to begin talks on a new coalition agreement.

Ultimately, the PLDM and the PDM, whose dispute had resulted in dismissal of the cabinet, agreed to form a new coalition, introducing some additional conditions. The two parties promptly amended several laws; particularly, keeping in mind the coming elections in 2014, they moved from a proportional to a mixed representation system, as well as prohibited using old Soviet passports for personal identification at the polls. It was noted that a mixed representation system would favour the PDM due to its large financial resources, while the prohibition to use Soviet passports as voter IDs would mainly affect the Communists' supporters (Litra, 2013b).

However, on 22 April, a day before the planned voting on a new coalition government, the Constitutional Court ruled that Filat could not be appointed as prime minister as he had been the subject of a no-confidence vote due to corruption accusations. The Court's ruling induced the PLDM to get into another temporary alliance with the Communists and to dismiss speaker Marian Lupu. Then, on 3 May the laws were amended again, allowing using Soviet passports as voter IDs, while the law establishing the mixed voting system was revoked and, in addition, the electoral threshold for political parties and blocs was raised: these measures were supposed to be aimed against the PDM (Calus, 2013). The PLDM and the PCRM also voted to dismiss the Prosecutor General, who had just been appointed on 18 April, as well as introduced the possibility to dismiss judges from the Constitutional Court and gave additional powers to the interim government of acting Prime Minister Iurie Leancă.

The laws adopted by the PLDM and the PCRM caused strict international reaction. Catherine Ashton and EU Commissioner Ștefan Füle issued a statement saying in particular: "important laws, touching upon fundamental issues for the functioning of Moldova's democracy, have been adopted with extreme haste, and without proper consultation with Moldovan society, or appropriate regard to European standards on constitutional reform, in particular those of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe" (European Commission, 2013). Representatives of other international organisations also criticised the laws adopted on 3 May. However, President Nicolae Timofti signed the laws (except the amendments to the Law on the Constitutional Court) despite the advices not to do so.



Commissioner Füle also warned that Chisinau had “days not weeks” to form a new government (Sindelar, 2013), while the expectations about the possibility to form a new coalition were mainly pessimistic. Some Moldovan analysts warned that unless a coalition could be formed, early elections would direct the country not towards the EU but towards the ex-“big brother” [Russia] (Litra, 2013b), and that Moldova was “very close to becoming a politically and institutionally failed state” (Vasilică, 2013).

Finally, on 30 May 2013, a coalition was formed by the PLDM, the PDM and a few MPs who left the PL. Coalition formation was stimulated by an understanding that an early election would benefit the PCRM: An opinion poll conducted in April 2013 had showed that 32.5% of respondents were ready to vote for the Communists (Institute for Public Policy, 2013), and such a proportion of votes would let them to form a government unilaterally. This also explains why the Communists took sides in turn with the PLDM or the PDM: there was a possibility to deepen the rift between coalition partners.

After the elections in November 2014 and near two months of negotiations, a minority coalition, the Political Alliance for a European Moldova (APME), was formed on 23 January 2015 by the PLDM, with 23 seats, and the PDM, with 19 seats. The PL stayed out as PLDM and PDM rejected its key demands, such as the reform of the Prosecutor’s office still controlled by the PDM (Cașus, 2015). The minority coalition was supported by the PCRM, which had lost a part of its voters to the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM). Then, following mass protests and a scandal resulting in resignation of the Prime Minister, Chiril Gaburici, in July a new majority coalition, the Alliance for European Integration III, was formed by the PLDM, the PDM and the PL.

The sequence of coalitions being formed by the PLDM and the PDM, led by two bitter rivals and two largest business owners in Moldova, Filat and Plahotniuc, finally resulted in a breaking of the duopoly of power on 15 October 2015. Following the motion of the Prosecutor General, Filat was deprived of parliamentary immunity and arrested on charges of involvement in siphoning off \$1 billion from the Moldovan banking system in 2014 and accepting a bribe. Plahotniuc rapidly used the opportunity to expand his political influence. Soon, the PLDM fell apart and became a marginal party, and some of its MPs supported the PDM candidate for prime minister. The majority of PCRM MPs also decided to cooperate with the PDM. The PL is also supposed to be under Plahotniuc’s strong influence. Having subordinated the greater part of the parliament in addition to his control of the judiciary, the anti-corruption institutions, the Constitutional Court and the economic structures, Plahotniuc “concentrated political and business influence in his own hands on a scale unseen so far in Moldova’s history since 1991”, yet the government system is unstable because despite Plahotniuc’s strengthening, 95 percent of the public dislike him (Cașus, 2016, p. 1). By some estimation, the forthcoming presidential elections may result in another political crisis (Kostanyan, 2016, p. 1).



Despite the European heritage, as well as current economic and other relations with the EU, the level of support for European integration diminished, with 40 percent in favour, while 44 percent prefer Eurasian integration (Kostanyan, 2016, p. 1). Such an attitude could be partly explained by Russian meddling in the autonomous region of Gagauzia, or by the preference of a part of the population based on the source of income, i.e. relatives working in Russia. However, low credibility of the political elite, marred by corruption, clashes over oligarchic interests and other factors, apparently, also plays a decisive role.

3. Ukraine: political context

The former Ukrainian authorities' insufficient reform performance may be especially disappointing taking into account that Ukraine's urge for moving closer to the EU had resulted in a decision to start working on preparation of an Association Agreement in 2008, even before the idea of EaP was conceived. Of course, while similar agreements with Central and Eastern European countries in the early 1990s had become precursors to membership, in Ukraine's case replacing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the Association Agreement was not considered a pathway towards eventual membership, and that was reflected by the expression "it neither precludes nor promotes Ukraine's membership aspirations" (Wolczuk, 2008). The lack of desire to grant Ukraine a clear membership perspective could be explained, particularly, by "enlargement fatigue" and the wish not to irritate Russia. However, it has also been noted that Ukraine is

arguably the perfect arena for oligarchic influence; even more so than many autocracies in the region. The oligarchy quashed the Orange Revolution's hopes of far-reaching economic and social reform after years in which post-Soviet corruption has strangled economic development, and it would be a tragedy if it did so again (Wilson, 2016, p. 4).

The situation in Ukraine reminds about the concept of "rebuilding the ship at sea", as it was formulated in 1998 by Jon Elster, Claus Offe and Ulrich K. Preuss, and the sea has been wild and stormy nowadays due to the "wind" from the East. Russian leadership's reaction to Ukraine's strategic choice in favour of association with the EU instead of joining Russia's integrationist bloc has been a source of instability in Europe for over two years, threatening the post-cold war international order as such, from the moment when Russia invaded and summarily annexed Crimea in March 2014. It would be rather illogical to review the policies and reform agenda of the Ukrainian government without taking into consideration the threat that Ukraine faces. Particularly, the Russian aggression showed how the failure to reform the most important state institutions, including the army and law enforcement agencies, during the era of independence resulted in a reduced



capability to protect itself. The lack of willingness to implement reforms led to a situation envisaged a few years ago:

Priorities, such as removing the breaks on economic development, tackling the poor investment climate, and dealing with the emerging security threats emanating from the Crimean Peninsula, are neglected. The creeping escalation of tensions in Crimea means that Russia increasingly is seen as preparing to ‘play the Crimean card’. Ukraine is hardly ready to deal with such a challenge (Wolczuk, 2008).

The pace of reforms still remains slow. The head of the European Union Advisory Mission on Civilian Security Sector Reform in Ukraine, Kálmán Mizsei, noted that “the current government is the most capable Ukraine has ever had, and the readiest to reform”, but also stated that corruption was widespread, rent-seeking persisted, some agencies, such as the system of prosecution, needed to be reformed, and the overregulation could continue to encourage corruption, impede foreign investment and alienate citizens (Central European University, 2015). In addition to not yet sufficiently reformed public administration, the business environment remains rather unattractive for investors: although Ukraine improved its standing in the World Bank Ease of Doing Business Index (World Bank, 2016) and the Index of Economic Freedom (Heritage Foundation, 2016), it still has the lowest rank among the EaP countries.

In an article published in April 2016, few days after Volodymyr Hroisman’s appointment for the post of Prime Minister of Ukraine, Andrew Wilson mentions the close ties between the oligarchy and the corrupt politicians as the biggest obstacle to reforms (2016, p. 1). Wilson considers the lack of reform a major threat:

A stark warning of the dangers of over-assessing reformist intent and avoiding frank talk about corruption is provided by neighbouring Moldova, which has been lurching from one political crisis to another throughout 2015 and early 2016. Ukraine needs tough love and aggressive conditionality, or it will end up like Moldova, but much sooner and with less to show for it (Wilson, 2016, p. 10).

Wilson clearly implies that the EU should be the one who offers “tough love and aggressive conditionality”. Some of the proposed measures include taking a tougher line with the Ukrainian leadership and pushing for a justice system and other reforms, and, at the same time, make clear that the government will be supported if the oligarchs attempt to destabilise it (2016, p. 1), moreover, “the EU must not disempower the reform lobby in Kyiv by shutting down the long-term hopes for closer engagement with the EU” (2016, p. 11). Wilson also argues that some policies backed by the West, in fact, strengthen the forces opposed to



reforms. This particularly applies to the Minsk agreements with their demand for constitutional amendments and decentralisation (2016, p. 4).

While veto players, including, *inter alia*, the oligarchs, corrupt officials, populist politicians and pro-Russian groups, have considerable influence on Ukrainian politics, the current government still has an opportunity to take the country out of the vicious circle described a few years ago: “Ukrainian politicians’ time horizons extend only to the next presidential elections (and yet another snap parliamentary elections in the meantime), regardless of the costs for the country and its ties with Europe” (Wolczuk, 2008). In summary, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that success or failure of the EaP has been depending on Ukraine to a large extent: if Ukraine had joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, the continuation of the EaP would have been unreasonable. Ukraine’s success remains an important condition for the other Eastern partners’ European integration, not only because of possible future regional leadership, but also because it underlines that Russia’s Eurasian ambitions are groundless.

4. Armenia: political context

Unlike Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, Armenia did not express an ambition to apply for EU membership in the future during the negotiations on the Association Agreement. That lack of ambition, together with other factors, might be the reason for one of the main proponents of the EaP, then Poland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski, to be rather sceptical shortly before the end of the negotiations: Sikorski noted that the EaP Vilnius summit might result in a great success should the “maximum plan” be implemented – i.e. if the agreement with Ukraine would be signed and negotiations with Moldova, Georgia and *possibly even Armenia* [italics author] would be finalised (Wielński and Wroński, 2013).

The sceptical approach was also more understandable considering Russian pressure on the Armenian government, which was acknowledged by several Armenian and foreign experts. In April 2013, Russia threatened an almost 70 percent gas price rise, and other threats were voiced repeatedly by Russian officials and diplomats, including the threats to ban Armenian exports to Russia; to block private money transfers and to deport Armenian migrant workers; to revoke the security guarantees; to destabilise the situation in Armenia and to support regime change; and so forth (Grigoryan, 2014b, pp. 105-106; Grigoryan, 2015b, pp. 13-15).

However, the Russian demands notwithstanding, the domestic political elites’ own attitude towards association with the EU was also not quite sympathetic. The domestic political situation makes the fulfilment of these and some other requirement especially difficult. As recently noted, “the political regime (a non-competitive political system dominated by oligarchic groups) would probably not survive the reforms which Armenia would be required to introduce (Delcour *et al.*, 2015, p. 493). Furthermore,



the political costs of adapting to EU demands would be expected to be higher in Armenia than in some other neighbouring countries. More particularly, EU requirements related to human rights, the rule of law and good governance are unattractive to the incumbent authorities (Delcour *et al.*, 2015, p. 494).

Additionally, while the incumbent government at least formally expressed willingness to implement EU-related reforms before making the decision not to sign the Association Agreement in September 2013, and afterwards has also been trying to show some commitment to further cooperation with the EU, most of the opposition is even less interested in it and shows a rather pro-Russian attitude (Grigoryan, 2015b, pp. 8-10). Therefore, one of the suggested important conditions leading to institutional reforms – strong pressure from below by domestic actors having political autonomy to mobilise in favour of compliance with EU demands for reform (Börzel *et al.*, 2012, p. 12) – is not sufficiently fulfilled. At the same time, even though the capabilities of non-governmental organisations and other civil society institutions advocating for a deeper cooperation with the EU are rather limited, their activities provoked repeated suggestions, particularly by the Russian ambassador to Armenia Ivan Volynkin, to “neutralise” such NGOs, possibly by means of adopting a “foreign agents” law like in Russia (Grigoryan, 2015b, pp. 15-16).

Concerning the elite’s devotion to the Russian legacy and indifference to the European norms, it is also worth mentioning the attitude widespread among the business elite (which, surely, for the most part overlaps with the political elite) at the time when the decision to join the EEU instead of signing the Association Agreement was discussed. A number of businessmen stated their preference for the EEU because of the reluctance to adopt higher production standards, as well as such ridiculous reasons as “speaking a common language” (i.e., Russian), or “similar business culture” (Gabrielyan, 2014) – the latter is remarkably nonsensical, considering such features of post-Soviet “business culture”, thriving in both Armenia and Russia, as cronyism, widespread corruption, arbitrary treatment by the tax office, property takeovers by means of engaging law enforcement agencies, and so forth.

Another example of “cultural affinity” promoted by the opponents of Europeanisation is the claim that Eurasian integration should be preferred because Russia, contrary to the West, would not ask to promote “non-traditional values” and “immorality”. This type of propaganda was widespread in the period when the Association Agreement was negotiated, and reached its peak in 2013, when a draft anti-discrimination law was about to be adopted. Later, as EEU membership was preferred to the Association Agreement this kind of propaganda calmed down, yet it resurfaced again after the session of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly in Yerevan in March 2015, when EU representatives stated that a new framework for



cooperation could be agreed upon (Grigoryan, 2015b, p. 14). Characteristically, the leader of the “parents’ committee” – one of the vocal groups claiming their aim is to protect “family values” from “artificially imported western perversions”, also leads the Yerevan Geopolitical Club – a Russian-language platform vilifying western democracy:

there is a clash between two geopolitical poles, one is the west and the other is the Russian Federation with its allies in the Eurasian Economic Union. Today, only this eastern bloc has in this or that way presented a challenge to the values of dehumanisation (Nikoghosyan, 2016).

In this context, it may be worth mentioning that similar approach – equating democratic values with “immorality” – may be observed in other EaP states as well. A “parents’ committee” was formed in Ukraine back in 2012; in Moldova, the leader of PSRM Igor Dodon submitted a petition to repeal the law on equality adopted in 2012, claiming that law was “an assault on national and Christian values” (Agora, 2016). Other examples could also be found, and it is generally possible to track down the pro-Russian orientation of those performing such activities, so this may be viewed as a rather peculiar kind of common “cultural legacy” – or an instrument reinforcing Russian influence.

4.1 The possibility of future cooperation between Armenia and the EU

The negotiations on a new EU-Armenia framework agreement officially began on 7 December 2015, and may be finalised, by the most optimistic scenario, by the end of 2016. The future agreement may cover cooperation on energy, transport and environment; measures to improve trade and investment opportunities; citizens’ mobility; and aid related to anti-corruption measures, governance and justice reforms, human rights, educational programmes, small business development and investment promotion. However, the agreement would not include preferential trade provisions as those would contradict Armenia’s obligations towards the EEU.

Official Yerevan’s desire to develop cooperation with the EU, the obligations towards the EEU (or, less euphemistically speaking, restrictions dictated by Russia) notwithstanding, is understandable. The economic reality has been harsh: since officially becoming an EEU member in January 2015, the Armenian economy has been in a continuous decline following the recession in Russia (Grigoryan, 2015a; 2015b, pp. 19-20; 2016), and the oil market condition makes a recovery in short or even mid-term perspective unlikely.

While the EU may not ignore the previous experience and the possibility of continuing pressure on Armenia by Russia, “aggressive conditionality” should also be applied. It is essential to ensure that an imitation of reforms will not let the



government to secure donor aid if genuine anti-corruption measures are not implemented and if authoritarian tendencies intensify. Besides, it is worth considering that the legal framework in Armenia is rather well-developed, yet poor performance is a challenge, particularly when oligarchic interests are involved. This may be observed in the case of business activities performed by state officials against the requirements set by the Constitution, in the case of the monopolies controlling the most profitable segments of business and restrictions on market competition, demarcation of voting districts, and so forth. So, strict compliance with the formalised but not observed rules may be an essential part of EU's conditionality.

Conclusions

There are two distinctive characteristics of the comprehensive review of the ENP based on consultations with partners: differentiation and ownership. First, the EU is going to offer programmes of cooperation tailored to the needs and choices of each individual partner in the neighbourhood. Second, the partners are to be more involved in designing the projects of cooperation, as owners of the process.

The EU may strengthen the Comprehensive Institution Building programme and increase support for countries achieving demonstrable reforms. At the same time, EaP states' political elites should not be rewarded for their costly and sometimes destabilising pursuit of self-interest. The "more for more" principle may work fine if autocrats and oligarchs are not allowed to interpret it as "more for nothing", thereby corrupting the EU's image in addition to the general disappointment of the citizens. Evidently, several of the problems are characteristic for different EaP states: authoritarian tendencies, oligarchs' grasp of the political institutions and the economy, poor investment climate, formal approach to the European norms, and so forth. So, the possible applicability of experience gained by those demonstrating genuine readiness to implement reforms may be considered in future research and policy design.

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